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# Design Potential of Bas-Relief by Way of the Sabre-Saw

Christopher Focht

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Design Potential of Bas-Relief by Way of the Sabre-Saw

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Candidate for the Master of Fine Arts in  
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of the Rochester Institute of Technology

May 27, 1968

Advisory Committee Chairman:

Professor Barschel

To Hans Barschel and Fred Meyer With Gratitude.

97358

6/20/68 K. T. THESIS

Table of Contents:

	page
I. Thesis Proposal.....	1-2
II. Exposition.....	13-26
III. Conclusion.....	27-28
IV. Footnotes.....	29
V. Bibliography.....	30



Index of Illustrative Material:

	page
B&W Photographs of Work.....	3-12
Effects of Lighting	
Introduction.....	31-32
Photographs.....	33-40
Color Photographs of Work.....	41

Proposal:

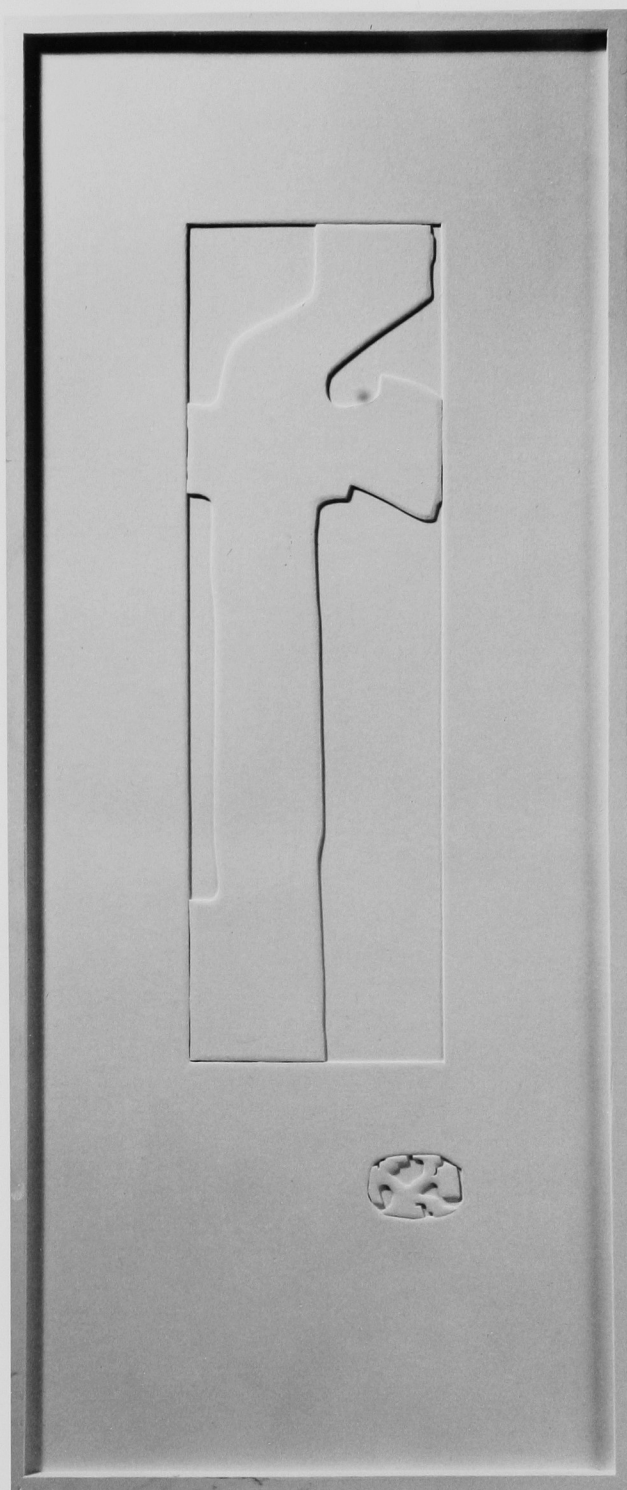
I           The purpose of this thesis is to explore the design potential of bas-relief, and to design and execute a group of works in relief with the sabre-saw as fine art pieces.

II   Scope of the thesis:

I will study early Egyptian and Mesopotamian relief sculpture, Etruscan jewelry, and American Indian art. I will undertake reading on contemporary design, including Georgy Kepes, Moholy-Nagy, and Rudolf Arnheim. Visual references, other than academic, will be used as important sources of inspiration, and will encompass an unpredictable range of subject matter. Architectural floor plans and topographic projection will be an obvious source of visual stimulation. The technical aspects of this thesis have already been settled. The artwork will be executed in masonite, including the relief projections that will be shaped by jig and sabre-saw, and fastened with contact cement. The work will be completed by heavy sanding, several coats of paint, and an acceptable frame. Six to eight final art pieces will be submitted.

### III Procedures:

After a thorough study of historical and contemporary references, idea and design concepts will be initiated and developed. The determined design will be projected to the correct scale, and the work will be executed. The thesis report will then be compiled from careful notes taken during the progress of the work. I would hope that a development would follow from the progress, and allow the formulation of an aesthetic statement.

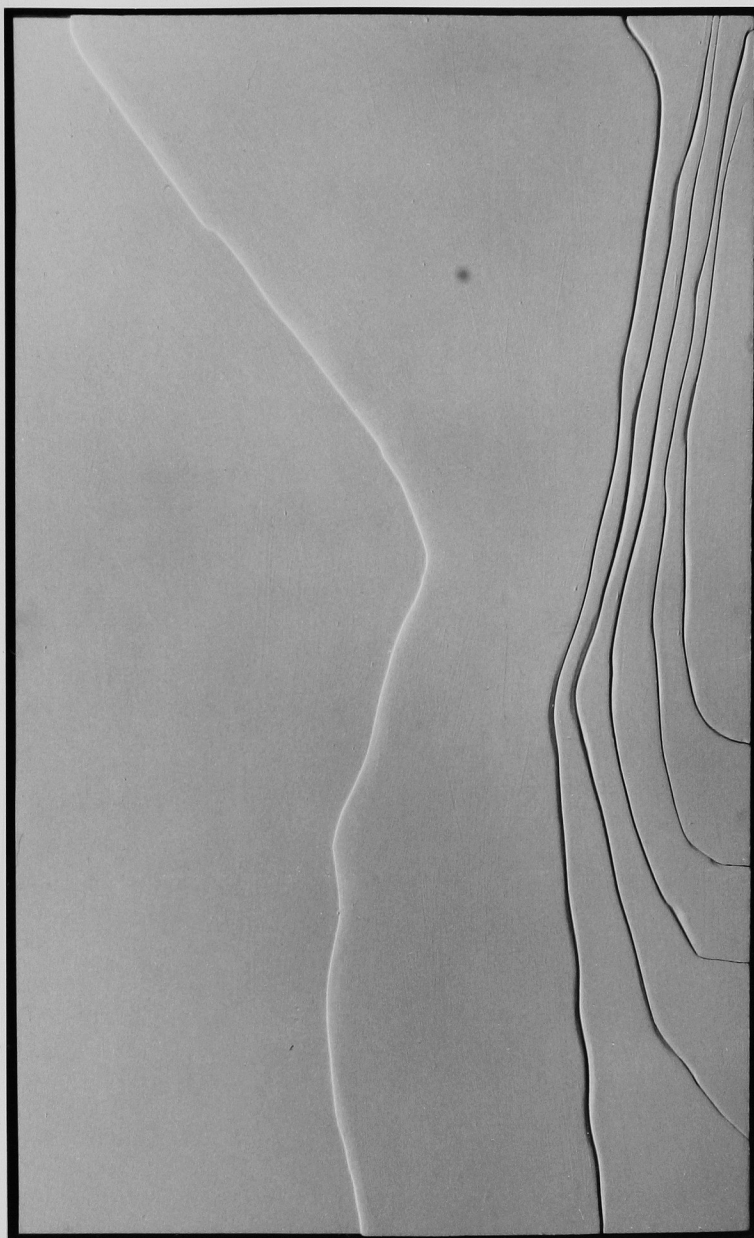




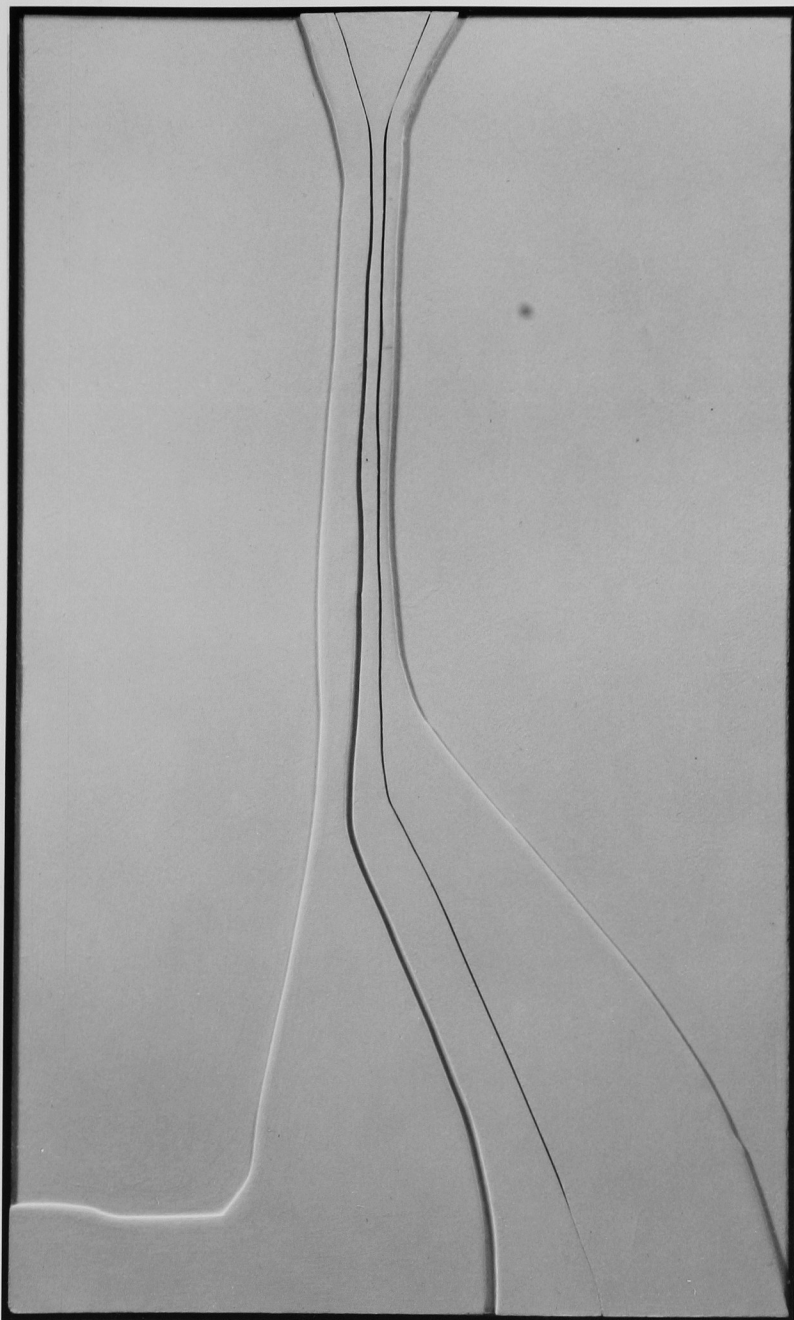


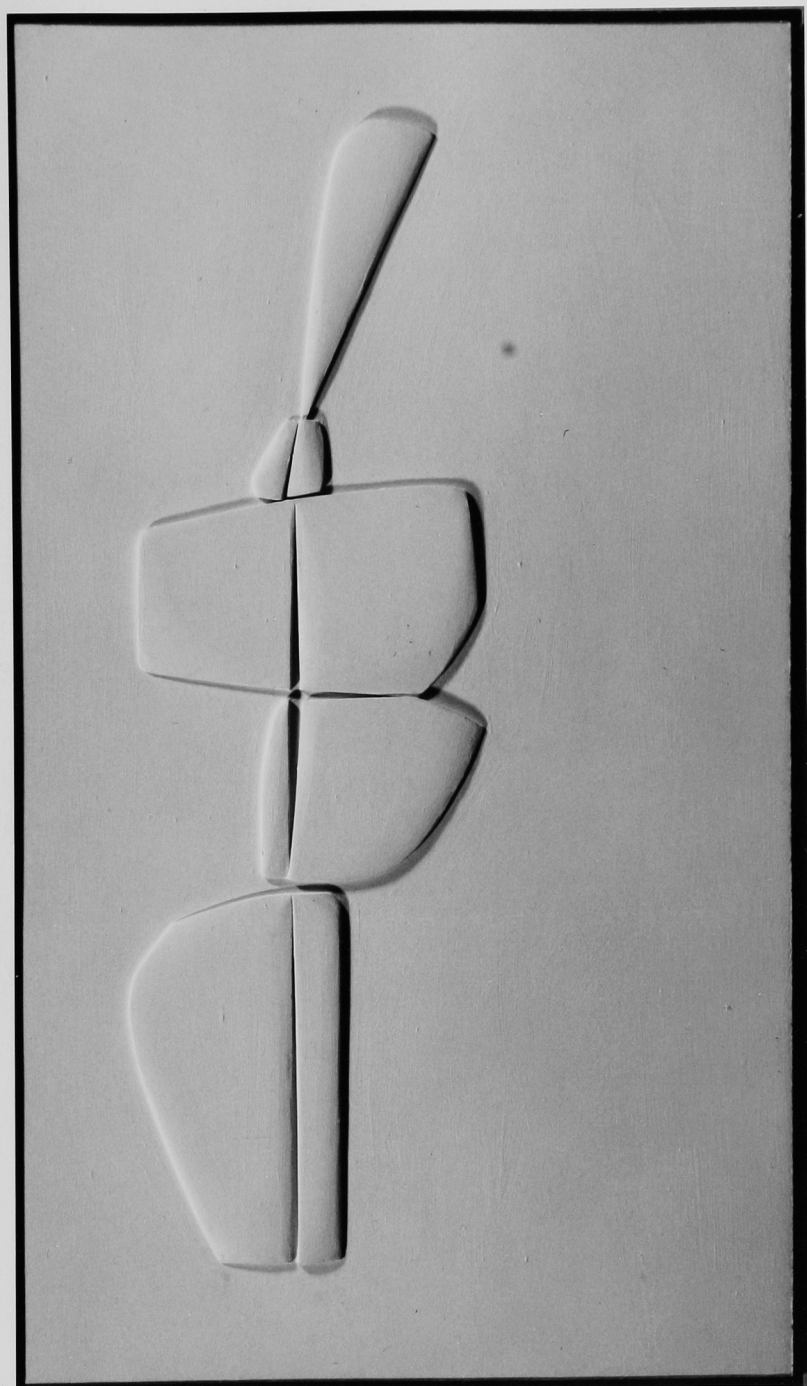


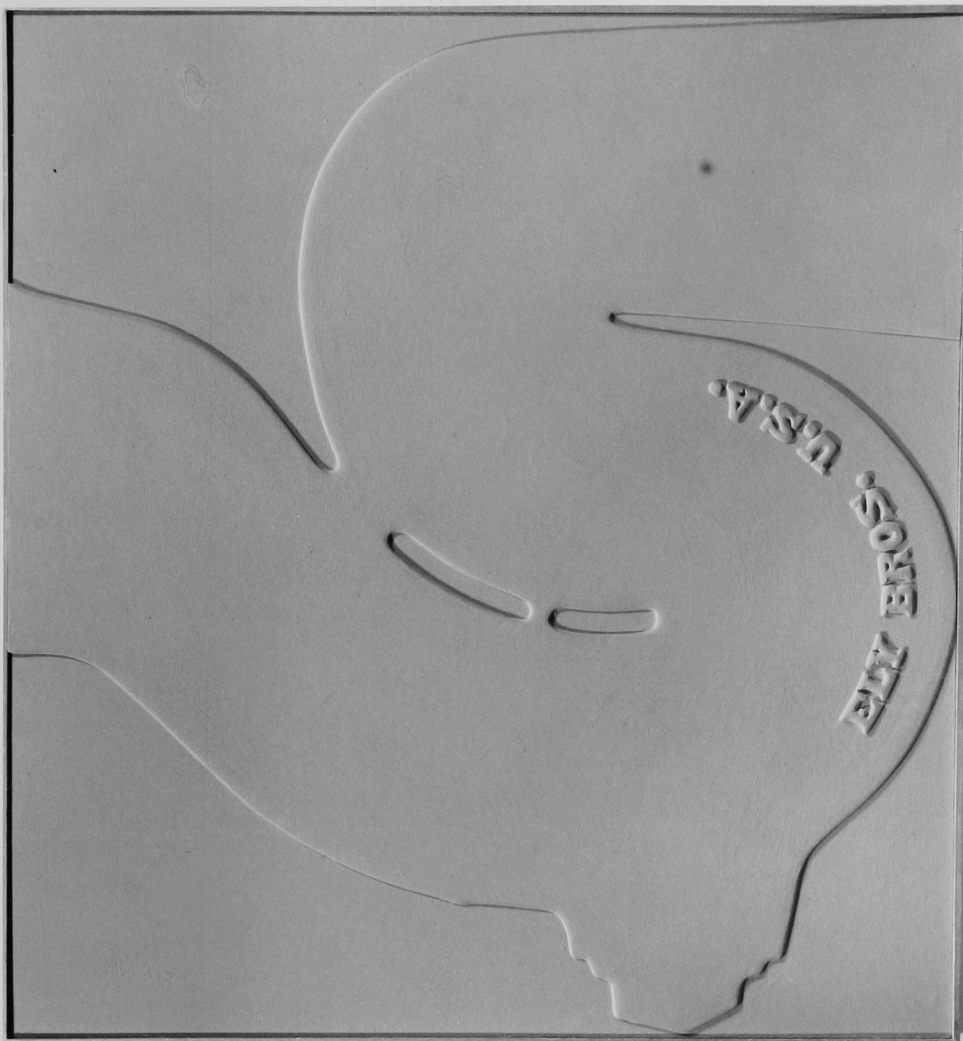




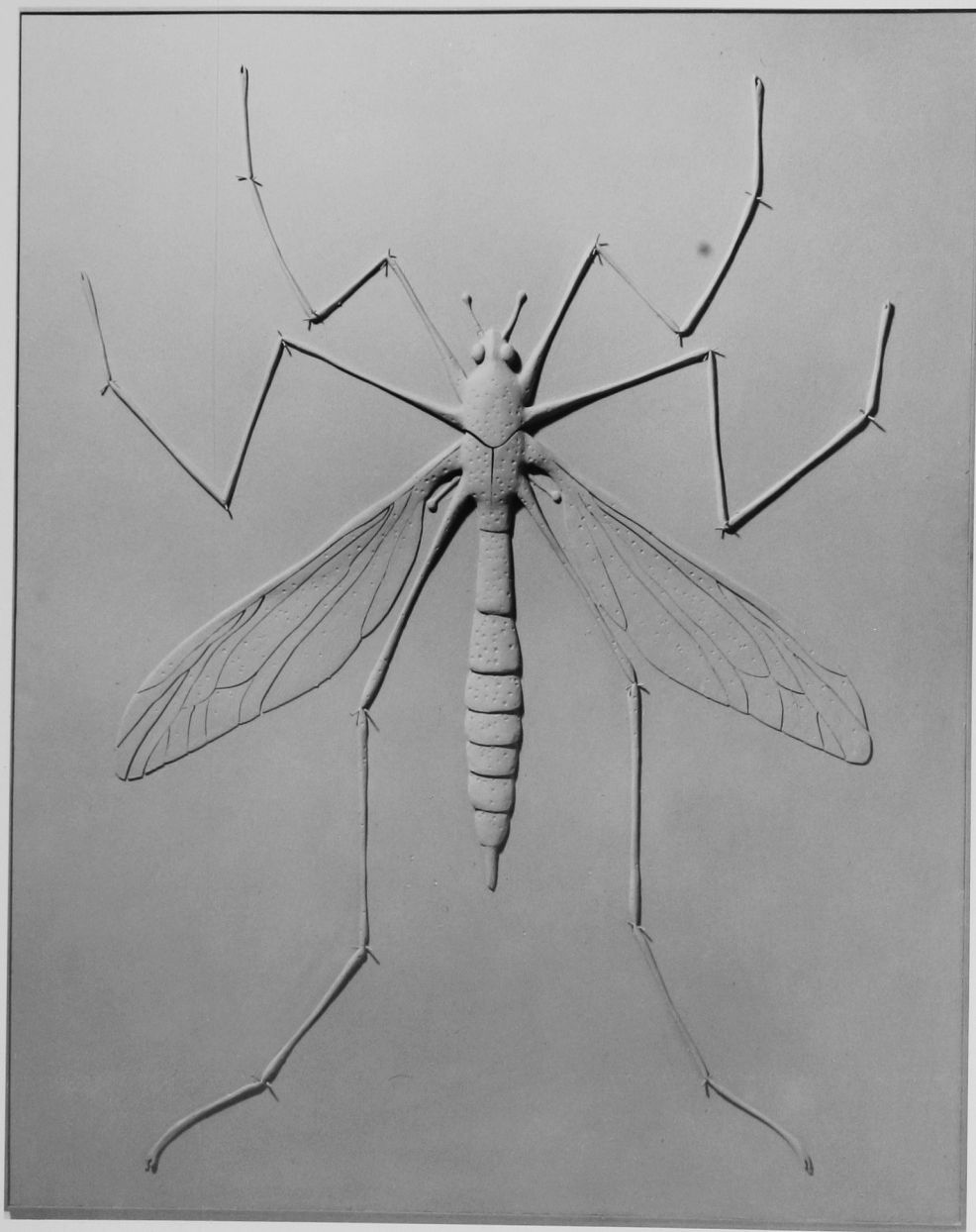


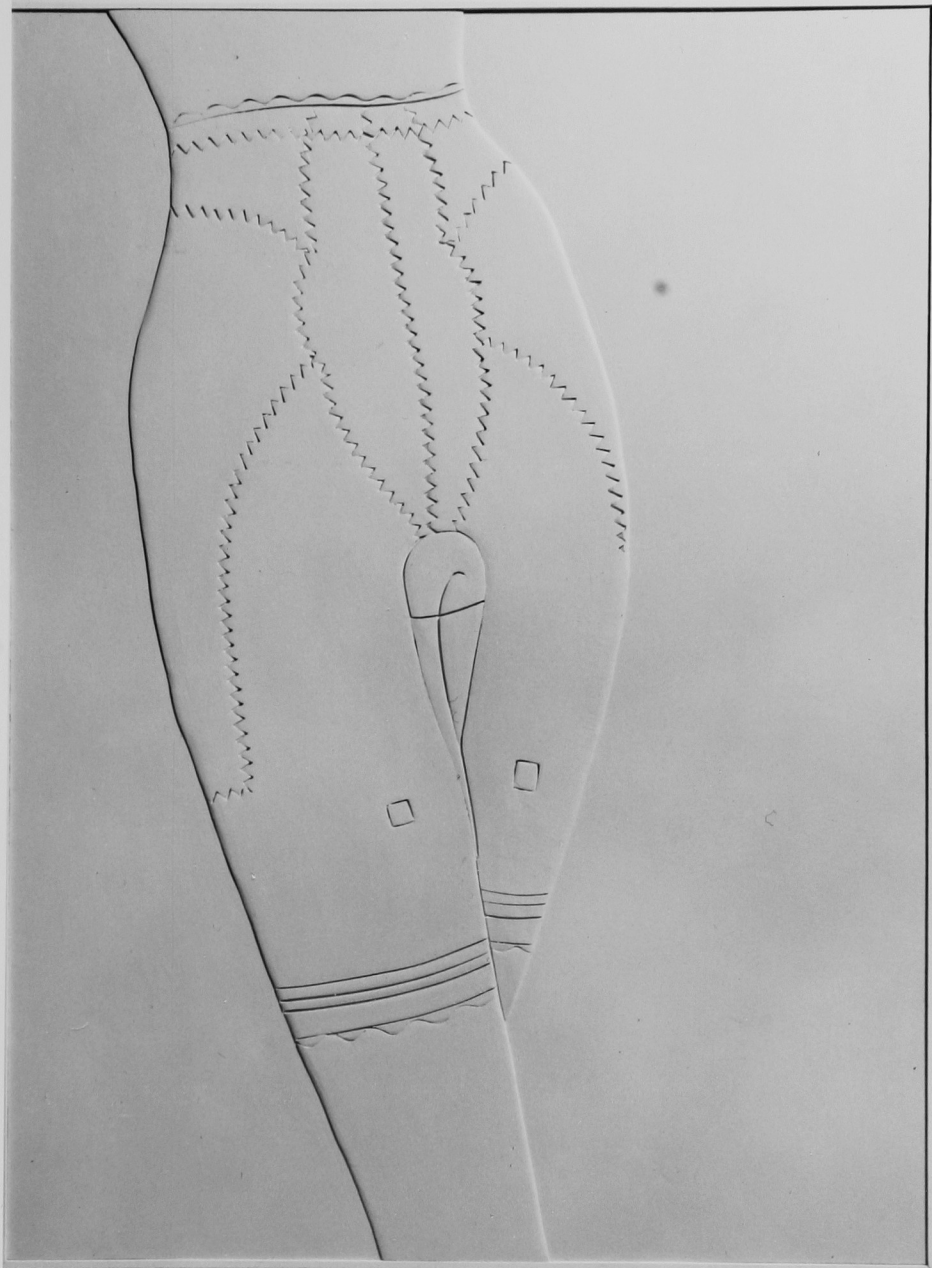












Q.F.. I think I will change that.

F.M.. Idiot.

# I. Exposition:

The direction of my thesis has largely been determined by efforts to discover the right media. Rightly or wrongly I have been swept into the obsession of the search (the plight of the student) and I am inclined to devote my energies to the search rather than the media. I want to insert however that in this thesis I have searched for a media, made a decision, and have committed myself to that decision; this makes up the body of the work in this thesis.

I recognize that trying to find a media tailor-made has its pitfalls and can compromise the creative process. I don't think this is the case here, however, because of my devoted, though perhaps forced commitment to the initial process. This is not to deny my temptation to digress, which is perhaps always present when an aesthetic commitment is made, nor to rule out the psychological manifestation that may have poisoned the work I was doing. I think that my constant unrest in finding the right media must be mentioned primarily because of its importance in understanding why the process that I have settled on is so specific in nature.

The media that I adopted was categorically related to the more tectonic processes. I wanted a media that related in the most elementary way to the artistic act. Where artistic intent is least likely to be lost by conduction in the heavy machinery of the process. I wanted a media that is tangible and is free of clandestine chemical devices. A process that can be physically manipulated and one that can send back some charms of its own. Perhaps I am overacting to photography, which is a field that I am generally devoted to, and one I find extremely transitory, latent and phantom. As a photographer I seem to experience a kind of sensory deprivation. I do not mean to lead to the conclusion however that the media I have elected is exclusively based on my reaction to photography. I am not suggesting that my motive is just personal therapy. I hope that part of my motive has something to do with the spiritual that art embodies.

Despite my sentiment and my conscious efforts to find a suitable media, I have discovered many shortcomings in the process that I settled upon. Perhaps my original judgement



was indiscreet, perhaps I am impossible to satisfy, and perhaps this is a good thing. However, despite the indiscretion I think some of the problems with the process I have uncovered are of some avail, and are not just sicknesses, but have a certain degree of interest and I hope are worthy of the following three analyses.

1. I appreciate that the shadows in my work are real, as real as a shadow could be, but what is bothersome is that the shadows are constantly threatened by the position of the piece. The way in which the work is lighted is of primary importance because the shadow and highlights are the only means by which the content of the the works are revealed. As the author, I feel that the statement is not yet set nor is it completed. The piece is vulnerable and is open to someone else's interpretation, someone who is allowed to laminate a statement on top of mine. Any painting has this problem of its surrounding environment, of course, but it's a problem that the intelligent viewer can overcome, by concentrating on the work. If my work on the

other hand is badly lit, the only thing the viewer can do is change the lighting, which is an absurdity to expect and is really my job to begin with. The sculptor it seems to me is especially faced with this problem, and it is something which he obviously must and does accept. But I think this is especially troublesome in my work, due to its low relief, its consequent subtlety, and which can therefore be changed<sup>1</sup> drastically or destroyed altogether.

2. Perhaps in every media there is some failure between the initial idea and the finished product that can be directly related to the inefficient mechanics of the process. I am not about to make any unique claims pro or con in regards to my process, but only to point out specific details that I encountered and feel are important.

I believe that the only practical way of working masonite shapes that will be glued as projections, is in their unpainted state. There is a dramatic change between the appearance of the raw masonite and the finished piece after painting, and I prefer to work without paint. The sculpting of the masonite

gives it a certain chairoscuro due to the discoloration of the the new material juxtaposed upon the surface material that has been exposed longer to air.

The problem is that I find myself reacting to the unfinished surface which will be many degrees different after it is painted. Changes that are justified in the unfinished masonite may be altogether wrong in the finished form. I am thus forced to work indirectly, and pre-visualize the effect that will take place, which is really a contradiction in terms of my criteria regarding a media. Changes in the technical process to overcome this do not seem practical to me. As it was previously mentioned painting the masonite before construction is useless. Working with other materials such as white plaster, which would allow me to see immediately the result, is not practical because of the material's weight and fragility, not to mention the difficulties in creating the same low relief and sharply defined<sup>2</sup> line effect that I get from masonite.

Line is one of the primary elements in my work, as the mass and color are subordinate

to the visual impression created by the line. I don't think any other material would give the same quality of line that I am now able to execute in masonite using the sabre saw. Perhaps one of the most sound and tempting alternatives to this problem is just not to paint the masonite in the first place and to capitalize on the shading and the quality of the bare construction. I think this however is more of an alternative than it is an answer to the problem within the boundary of my present thesis. Furthermore, raw masonite has the associated stigma of a building material which I think is difficult to overcome. In this regard the technique that was used disguises the material and gives the piece some aesthetic legitimacy,<sup>3</sup> fair or unfair as the case may be.

3. Sculpture in every age tends to present the perfected and the ideal, and reflects perhaps more consistantly a distillation of the idea embraced by a culture than any other medium. One of the reasons for this is that the media is so ponderous, a coefficient that makes the art as permanent as it is, and leads to a certain prudence regarding the motif. The methods that

I have developed are in no way as tedious as many forms of conventional sculpture, but compared to painting it is less fluid and changes are more difficult. I am therefore committed pretty much to the original concept, which puts unusual stress on the vanguard idea.

The problem to all this is that the question becomes a matter of the idea, and this is troublesome because I believe art deals with something more than just the idea. Furthermore, I don't feel the idea is an area within which I can make my best contribution. This problem is, however, coincidentally familiar to photography, where the creative act becomes a matter of selection, or quest for idea. Somehow art on this level can too easily be reduced to the inane. The question becomes what will I cast in gold today? Should I do a drainpipe or a corset? Should it be indian yellow or magenta? I don't think that this experience is abnormal or any different than say Ghiberti's who was faced with a similar absurdity: it seems to me he must have asked "Should I do a sacrifice of Abraham or an Annunciation?".

This problem is particularly prevalent in

painting today because painting and sculpture have become diffused, the latter being so analytical it spreads the infection on to the other. Today the idea in painting seems to be attacked with a special gusto and becomes the entire point of the work. Despite the stampede, I don't feel any better; I still must stand the hazard of the die.

I will now attempt to elaborate on some of the levels of this media which I favor, and if I can, draw some justification. I feel that I must warn that the following may sound contradictory, as the validity of both sides of the case seemed to convince me at the same time, and thus I suggest that it is more paradoxical than contradictory. I think all too often the artist is accused of contradicting himself because he is faced with a complex number of problems and answers, none of which are finite. One can feel hot and cold at the same time because he has two hands, and likewise one can favor or disfavor a media for two different, opposing, though valid reasons. There is also some trouble when a non-verbal such as the creative experience is translated into a verbal state. The fact that it happens should

be enough to justify it, though as a verbalization it may prove to be contradictory.

Perhaps, on the other hand, all that I am warning against is my own verbal obscurity.

1. Michaelangelo said, "One paints, not with  
<sup>4</sup>  
 the hand but with the brain." Michaelangelo believed that the artist was blessed with an "intelletto", a certain special faculty for discerning beauty and harmony through the mind. The intellect was capable of such tremendous concepts that the media was always unable to match it. Perhaps this is why Michaelangelo lamented "I would have been just as well off  
<sup>5</sup>  
 if I had made sulfur matches." Michaelangelo was quick to observe, however, that the distinction between the good painter and the poor lies here. The poor artist will never be tormented by the failure of his hands to carry out the conception because the poor artist cannot visualize the idea nor does he  
<sup>6</sup>  
 have a powerful imaginative faculty.

Admittedly, the latter is neo-platonic thinking and perhaps has been rightly questioned by philosopher's since. It seems to me, however that THE SAME CYCLE OF THOUGHT HAS RETURNED as

the idea seems extremely relevant to contemporary thought, and to some of my involvements in this thesis. As I have previously mentioned, painting and sculpture have come to be very analytical, with the suggestion that this is due to the latter because sculpture tends to be more analytical by nature of its process. On the other hand I reject this because I tend to be a romantic and give primacy to the joy, excitement, hallucination, waste, and torment of the creative spirit. Conversely, I can negate the romantic viewpoint and accept the depersonalization, and the reduction of emotion that embodies the pure intellect, for the reason that the antithesis of emotion and sensation reapproaches sensation. When the idea becomes the whole point of my work as I have complained I can reject it in terms of my romantic demands, but not for what can be said for the intellect. Today, with the cold, cybernetic approach to art, perhaps I am justified in relying on the intellect though as I have implied "getting on the bandwagon" does not make me feel any better. The point is, feeling does not <sup>a</sup>have anything to do with it, nor



does the bandwagon.

Bumpkin Dionysianism in art is Bumpkin  
 Dionysianism. 8  
 Ad Reinhardt in art is Ad Reinhardt.

Michaelangelo's concern with the intellect is perhaps somewhat incompatible with the concept today. My involvement is perhaps better related to the more platonic ideas. The torment of never arriving at the goal that the intellect sets has been very real to me, but one that I accept with some gratitude. The idea, though never reached, gives me a direction and a point of view as well as an elevation that may not have been achieved otherwise. The idea that is never reached means a constant refurbishing zeal. The idea may not be blessed with Michaelangelo's "intelletto", it might be absolutely inane, but I always make enough mistakes along the way that I never quite get there, and so I have the chance to capitalize on my ineptness.

2. Sculpture can be as representational as a painting, but a painting is not an object as is a sculpture. A painting is an object only as a painting, which in this context

and value is immaterial. And so I think there is some gain for the medium of sculpture, which I hope is more than meaningless tautology. Sculpture maintains a reality beyond the fact of representation or illusion, or for that matter, color or light. It has a ponderability and mass that is intimately related to the material. To know that the art object has weight is somehow significant and affecting. My work, I am certain, has weight, and yet it is very much like a two dimensional painting, because of the almost exaggerated flatness of the form. I think that the result is that it becomes a three-dimensional object with a two-dimensional impression. I hope there is some gain from this conflict.

A complaint that I alluded to earlier here deserves an opposite point of view, that being that the work is never satisfactorily stable, that the statement can always be changed by the condition of the light. Though this is as annoying problem, it gives the work a certain reality which a conventional painting does not have by the same degree. The fact that the work can be changed, that it must be

handled with such care makes it more of a  
real thing, which I think is part of the  
curiosity of conventional sculpture.

### III. Conclusion:

I am pleased that this thesis has taken me into areas which I have not ventured into before, because it seems to me that formal education can offer this one opportunity at it's best. I have had some criticism in this regard, all politely implied, and in one case expertly Socratic, that I am evading my previous training and education. I do not take this criticism bitterly, as I am inclined to dismiss it as a stinking, twentieth-century cliché: SPECIALIZATION.

48 There have been certain factors in this thesis that have puzzled me, and in many cases I remain bewildered, but this condition is just as valuable as lessons that I learned and questions that were answered. Certainly, ventures led to contradictions or paradoxes that have not been resolved. But on the other hand, they have led to avenues of thought that have expanded my vocabulary of ideas that will always be useful.

I am happy that I have investigated a new medium, though I remain as restless as ever. The medium has perhaps been satisfying in terms

of the tectonic palpation that I was looking for, but more important, the commitment to it seems to have created an aching anxiety to return to photography. I seem to have some new dimension that has matured during my photographic fasting and has been aided by some fantastic dialectic machinery. As I have previously alluded, aesthetic commitments are always difficult to keep, because outside there is always something scintillating.. It is interesting that this thesis, before I started and now am about to abandon, was also scintillating.....Perhaps I am just chasing. Perhaps I have discerned a little.

I also loom with the earth  
 Over the waterways of space. Between  
 birth and death I may touch under-  
 standing  
 As a moth brushes a window with its wing.  
 I have discerned a little, I know more  
 than the gossip that comes over my gate.

Christopher Fry

IV. Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup>See page (17), "Effects of Lighting" (7)

<sup>2</sup>See photographs, pages (3-13).

<sup>3</sup>I think that whether by tradition or by some kind of artistic truth, art must distinguish itself from the commonplace. Among many ways that art can distinguish itself is by technique. Technique is not however what I totally aspire to, and I trust that this is evident.

<sup>4</sup>Stolnitz, Art Criticism, p. 107.

<sup>5</sup>Clements, Michelangelo's Theory of Art, p. 28.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 1-66.

<sup>7</sup>It's interesting to note that Michaelangelo being primarily a sculptor felt as strongly about the idea and the intellect. It's curious to speculate that it may have been the medium, sculpture, and by nature of it's process, that made him such a great exponent of the "intelletto," though Leonardo made the same comment about painting with: "One paints with the mind." I refer the reader to Bernard Bosanquet, The Importance of The Medium.

<sup>8</sup>Battcock, The New Art, p. 209.

<sup>9</sup>19th Century literature was greatly involved with this theme:

What I aspired to be,  
And was not, comforts me.  
A brute I might have been, but  
would not sink i' the scale.

Browning

Or R.L. Stevenson: "There is always a new horizon, and although we dwell on a small planet, immersed in petty business and not enduring beyond a brief period of years, we are so constructed that our hopes are inaccessible, like stars, and the term of hoping is prolonged until the term of life...It's better to travel than to arrive."

See conversation on page (13) Fred Meyer, and Chris Focht.

V. Bibliography:

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Effects of Lighting:

The following photographs were made to show how light affects the character of the work. The bottom photograph indicates the set up of the lighting, while the top photograph shows in detail the effects on the subject.

The photographs appear as follows:

photo HP (page 33)

Both floodlights on, placed at an angle of 45 degrees to the subject.

photo HG (page 34)

Left floodlight on only, placed at an angle of 45 degrees to the subject.

photo HW (page 35)

Right floodlight on only, placed at an angle of 45 degrees to the subject.

photo HK (page 36)

Right floodlight on only, raised eight feet, placed 45 degrees to the subject.

photo SH (page 37)

Both floodlights on, raised eight feet, placed 20 degrees to the subject.

photo SN (page 38)

Left floodlight on only, raised eight feet, placed 20 degrees to the subject.

photo NK (page 39)

Studio ceiling lights on only.



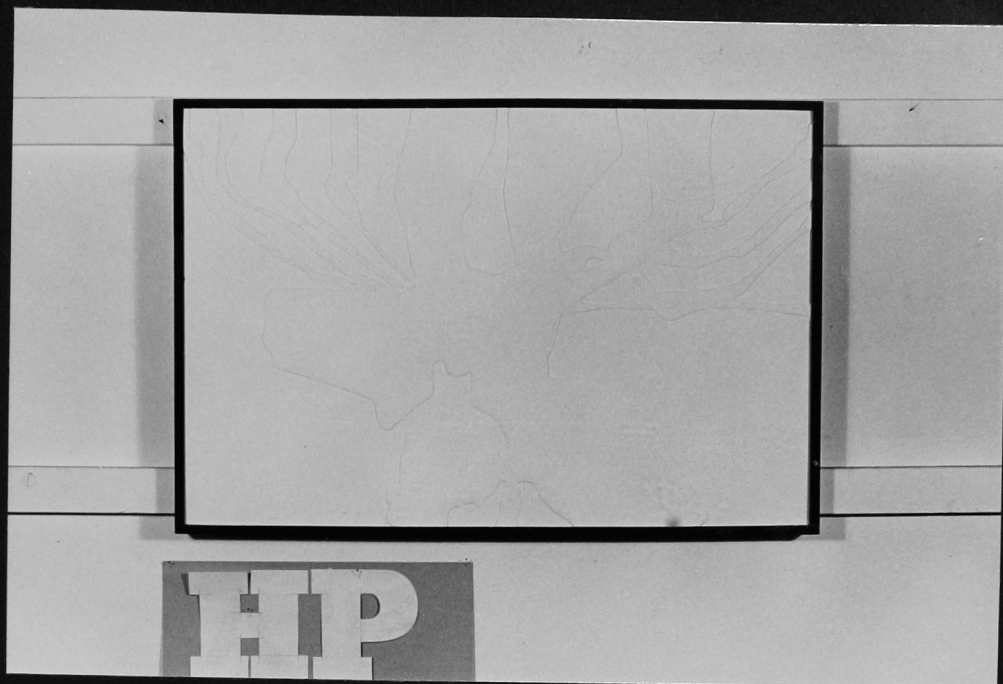
photo WY (page 40)

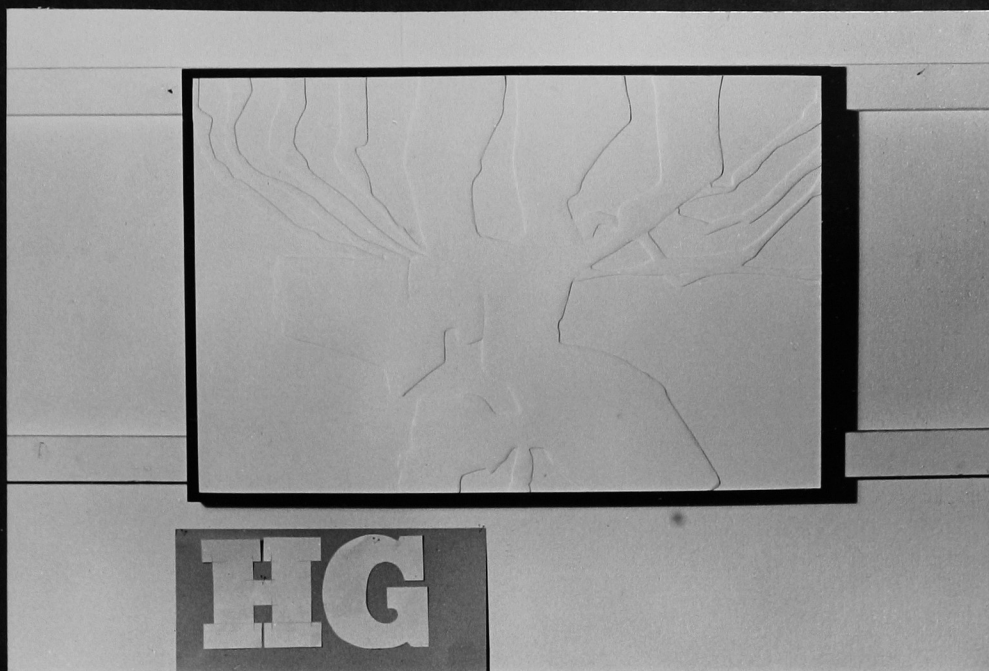
Spotlight on only, raised and  
about fifteen feet from subject,  
45 degrees.

photo YG (page 41)

Both floodlights on, raised eight  
feet, placed 85 degrees to the sub-  
ject.

Please see pages(16-17) for further  
discussion.







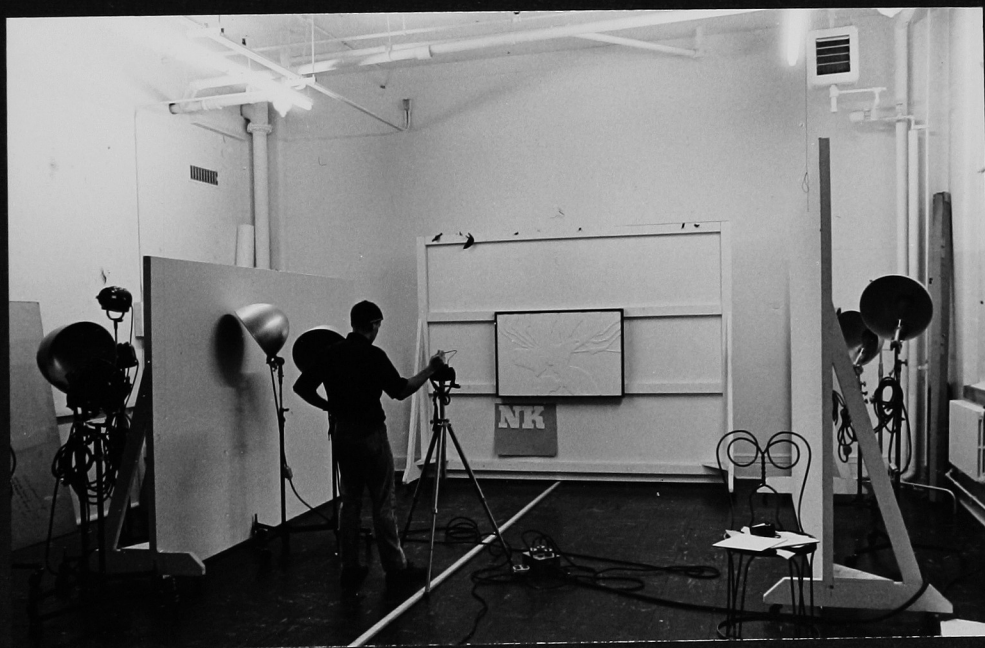




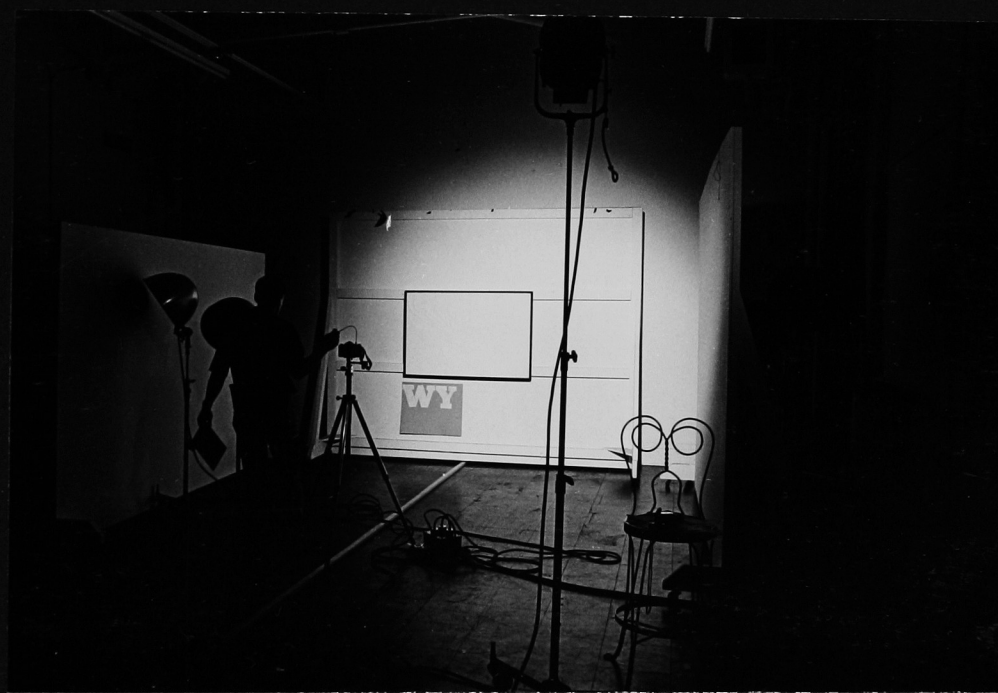
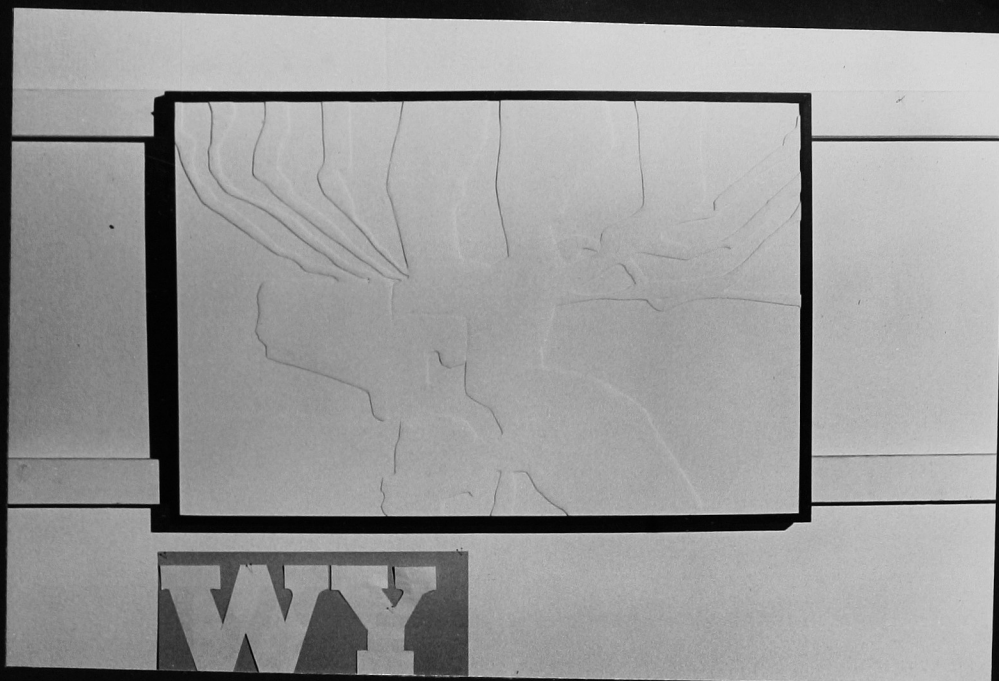


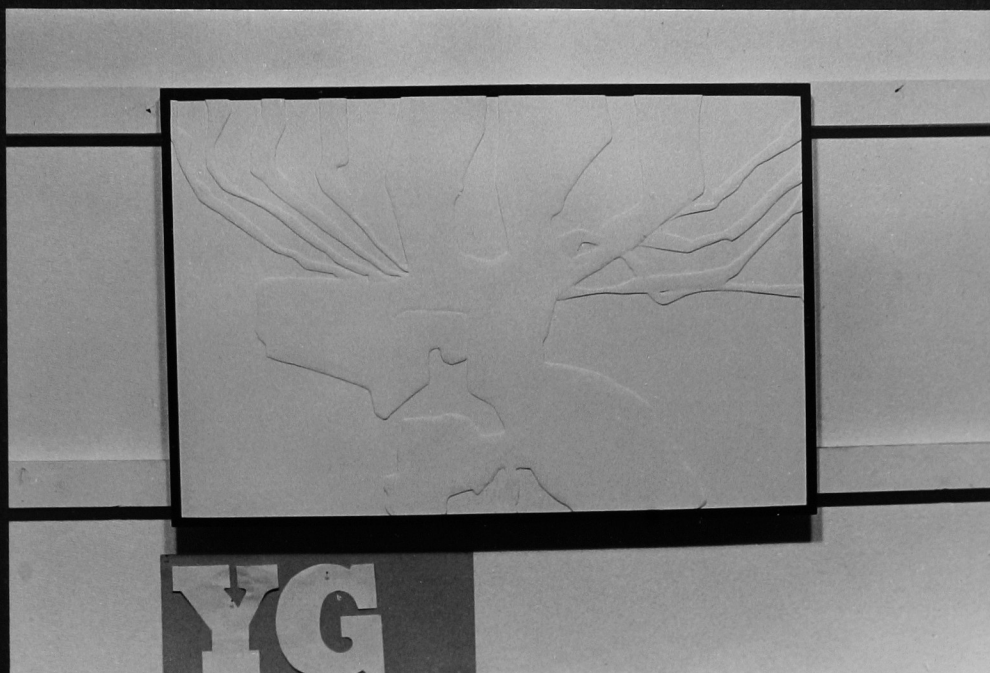












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10

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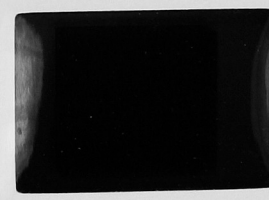


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